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'Is It a Library? A Student Center? The Athenaeum Opens at Goucher College' has been sent to milan.karol@goucher.edu; kate.pipkin@goucher.edu.

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Is It a Library? A Student Center? The Athenaeum Opens at Goucher College

By Scott Carlson

Towson, Md.

Today's academic-library buildings, more than any other campus structures, have to be all things to all people—places where social and intellectual pursuits collide, places that serve the community and the individual simultaneously. Dig into a book. Get a latte.

Collaborate on a project. Nap during a study session. College libraries are a destination for those activities and more.

Now at Goucher College, much more.

Any new library building will have hissing espresso machines, padded chairs, and noisy study areas. But what does one make of a library with an art gallery, a restaurant, and open forum space that can seat at least 700 people? How about treadmills, exercise bikes, and rowing machines as well?

The Athenaeum, scheduled to open this month, might be one of the more unusual library-building projects in recent years.

Administrators hope it will invigorate the campus as a social and academic hub.

The campus, to which the college moved in the 1950s, had come to feel spread out and disconnected. The new \$48-million, 103,000-square-foot building may test the role that libraries can play as a campus heart—and test the boundaries of what we call a library.

Goucher's old Julia Rogers Library building, a traditional structure built when the campus was established, would not do. When Sanford J. Ungar became president, in 2001, the college had been planning to renovate the Rogers Library for \$32-million. But he had misgivings about the renovation right away.

"I thought it was implausible to raise that kind of money for a library renovation," Mr. Ungar says. The building wasn't big enough, wasn't dynamic enough—even renovated, it would still be an old-school library, he says. "It was always going to be a renovated problem."

In building a new library, the president says, "you have a chance to do something really imaginative, something that really fits with the times."

Defining the Needs

Mr. Ungar went to visit Freeman A. Hrabowski III, president of the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, who had become a mentor to new college presidents. Mr. Hrabowski gave him a tour of the campus and told him that the admissions office was in the most important place: the library.

"It struck me as an important concept," Mr. Ungar says. "You don't diminish the importance of the library by putting other things in it."

As Goucher and its architects started work on designing a new library, they surveyed students on their feelings about the campus experience. "Most people said that it was very nice but very spread out," which limited vital, serendipitous contact among people, says Nicholas P. Garrison, an architect with RMJM Hillier, the firm that designed the Athenaeum. "We needed a place where students would crash into each other more often, and have a reason to crash into one another."

The discussions about the building became particularly poignant after September 11, 2001. "The college didn't have a place where students could gather, watch the evening news, and talk about what is happening in the world," Mr. Garrison says.

In the design process, the building started out as a catch-all for things that the college needed. It encompassed nearly 200,000 square feet at one time, including parking and theaters and offices. Mr. Ungar recalls that Nancy Magnuson, Goucher's library director, was initially skeptical about the design. "She thought that I was going to make the library one of the rings of a three-ring circus," he says.

Eventually the building was pared down to its essential parts. But its name was chosen to reflect the various activities it would house. "I started doing research on the athenaeum of classical times," says Mr. Ungar, "and it was a central gathering point where people came for a variety of purposes—serious, frivolous, cultural, artistic, and social."

Blended Uses

The social aspects of the building strike a visitor first—particularly in the grand gathering space, or forum. It cuts a wide path through the center of the building and extends up four stories, to a glass roof. Big terrazzo steps cascade from the front door to a stage two floors down.

On one side of the forum is an art gallery in which artists can hang items as heavy as grand pianos from the ceiling. The restaurant, which serves sandwiches and other light fare, is on the other side.

It's clear that the blending of private, social, serious, and frivolous spaces was one of the main challenges the architects had to grapple with. The stacks—symbolic core of any library—provide a good example of that challenge. They were designed to be a serious study area, but they had to coexist with the forum, the restaurant, and other features. Architects separated the stacks from the bustling bulk of the building with a 15-foot-wide, four-story-tall atrium that they call "the slot." The stacks, in a prislime glass structure facing a campus road, hold study carrels and modern lounge chairs commonly seen in libraries, along with neon-colored beanbag chairs strewn about.

"We tried to create that intimate library experience of being in the book stacks and getting your work done and being away from everybody," Mr. Garrison says. For a building that will be open 24 hours a day, safety was also a consideration. "We put it all in glass," he says, "so nobody would feel uncomfortable being there late at night or get the feeling that if they screamed and yelled, nobody would see them."

Still a Library?

The stacks are one of the first things people see when approaching the building from the road, with the candy-colored shelves—blue, yellow, red—and quiet study areas clearly visible inside. It's an intentional placement, meant to signal that books still hold a prominent place in the building, despite all the other attractions.

Among those attractions, on a balcony overlooking the forum, is the exercise equipment—ellipticals, bikes, rowing machines. "We'll see how much they are used," Mr. Ungar says. "It's a gamble—something I insisted on, because I think that if we are going to have a place where you can do everything, exercise should be part of it."

There is also a studio for the campus radio station, classrooms, a commuter lounge with a full kitchen, a unisex bathroom with a shower, along with all of the usual trappings of a traditional library: circulation and reference desks, study spaces, computer labs, and a prominent space for the display and preservation of special collections. It all comes in a package that prominently displays green features: A rain garden collects and processes storm-water runoff, and people can gather on balconies overlooking the roofs, which are planted in sedum, a flowering plant that can tolerate heat and drought.

With all of those features, is the Athenaeum still a library? Michael Sherman, a senior majoring in political science who was hanging out in the building during a reporter's visit, describes it differently. "The Athenaeum will be the student center that Goucher really needed," he says. "It's a very dynamic space. It's academic, it's social."

During a tour while the building was still under construction, Ms. Magnuson, the librarian, and Linda Barone, Goucher's facilities project manager, negotiated how to answer that question.

"I would argue that the library of today is more than what one might think of as a traditional library," Ms. Magnuson said.

But it's really much more than a library, with the commuter lounge, the art gallery, the radio station, and the forum, Ms. Barone said.

Ms. Magnuson finally shrugged. "It's the Athenaeum," she said.

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